
**Islington Council
Culture Diagnostic
2006**

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
CULTURE DIAGNOSTIC MAIN REPORT	5
Introduction.....	5
Why should we be interested in developing the culture of the organisation?	6
What has been driving the culture in Islington?	8
The Role of the Assessment Team	9
The Assessment Themes.....	11
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS.....	11
Desired State.....	14
Some “Patterns of Behaviour”	16
Recommendations	18
ANNEX A: METHODOLOGY	21
ANNEX B: DETAILED FINDINGS FROM THE ASSESSMENT.....	22
LEADERSHIP.....	22
PERFORMANCE	23
CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION	30
COMMUNICATION	32
CHANGE	34
INTERDEPARTMENTAL WORKING	36
SYSTEMS AND SKILLS	37
DIVERSITY	39
OUTWARD ORIENTATION	41
ANNEX C: Correlation of Findings with Staff Survey and Existing Policies	43

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Organisational culture – “how we do things around here” – is something that we all affect by what we believe about where we work and how we behave. It is something that can be changed - although in some cases it may take time to do successfully.

2. The aim of the review described in this report is has been to formulate a strategy for generating an organisational culture for Islington Council so that we **both** deliver more and it is a better place to work in. In other words our aim has been at one with the Leader who has said recently that he wants to see a culture of a “continuous striving for improvement at the heart of the organisation”.

3. The staff satisfaction survey contained generally positive results and showed considerable improvement in how the organisation is viewed by many of the people who work for it. However, it also showed that the council is not functioning well for everyone reinforcing the strategic need to look at how our culture could be improved:

- culture can slow down or even nullify management initiatives to secure change
- satisfaction with services and the council depends on how staff across the council engage with and respond to users and residents
- the external environment is going to be even tougher and will increasingly probe aspects of our culture
- performance management is more effective if it is supported by the values and beliefs that make up our culture
- there are benefits, including financial ones, in moving from an emphasis on the “quick fix” to a problem to one where it “stays fixed”.

4. Since being assessed as a poor council, rapid improvement has been achieved by dynamic top-down leadership and a relentless focus on making the changes that are needed to improve our assessment by the Audit Commission. Most people within the council would agree that this was a necessary approach that has impacted the culture of the organisation. The question now is whether this changed culture is sufficient or desirable for the next phase of our improvement journey.

5. The work that the assessment team has done is intended to illustrate how we might now move forward by:

- assessing the **current culture within Islington** and what is working well and less well from the perspective of a range of staff and partners in particular in terms of **leadership, management, performance, creativity, and communication**

- considering on the basis of the assessment findings what a **desired state** for the council might look like – the main characteristics of which are **clearer vision and values, greater consistency, greater confidence and greater openness**
- identifying some “**patterns of behaviour**” that reflect the most significant ways in which the current culture operates. Positively in terms of **a strong public service ethos and being strongly results orientated**; less so in terms of **having too many priorities, sometimes ‘hitting the target but missing the point’; insufficient management of poor performance; and not being sufficiently open.**

6. Finally, the assessment team have made a recommendation for moving forward which is intended to establish both the expectation that certain issues will be addressed and the confidence that those who do address them will be supported. Our recommendation is that **the Chief Executive, CMB and those who report to CMB should:**

- **commit to the following outcomes;**
- **give each other the freedom and flexibility to achieve them; and**
- **hold each other to account for their efforts with mutual feedback and feedback from staff forming an integral part of that process.**

The outcomes are:

- poor performance of individuals, teams and services should be tackled by all those who are responsible and accountable for that performance - promptly, effectively and in a manner which is sensitive to the dignity of others
- decisions and priorities should be clear and clearly implemented (including when something is not a priority)
- fair treatment and equality of outcome for all members of staff should be sought in implementing working practices (e.g. in reaching judgements on individual performance, access to training and development, inclusion in informal networks, on flexi time, parental leave, and sickness absence)
- leadership, creativity and innovation should be expected and supported at all levels within the council
- diversity and equality should be promoted and communicated in terms of what is needed in Islington as a council and a place
- senior managers should be open with each other and with their staff about what is working and what needs to change.

CULTURE DIAGNOSTIC MAIN REPORT

“Last summer, local government watchdog the Audit Commission wrote that Islington Council is “the fastest improving Council in the country”. Now we want to drive further forward into ensuring even greater consistency of high standards across the organisation. A culture of continuous striving for improvement must be at the heart of the Council. We will continue to go out and learn from others – in the public and private sectors – how we can do things even better.”

James Kempton, Leader, Islington Council, May 2006.

Introduction

1. This report was commissioned by CMB to contribute to the next stages of development of the council's improvement journey. Both the political and managerial leadership and the people who work for the council are crucial to achieving further improvement. However, the focus of this report is on the council's senior managers and staff since the organisation can only genuinely improve if the people whom it employs deliver.
2. Organisational culture – the best and simplest definition of which is still “how we do things around here” – is something that we all affect by what we believe about the organisation and how we behave. It is something that can be changed - although in some cases it may take time to do successfully.
3. The aim is an organisation that **both** delivers more and is a better place to work in. The argument is that these are mutually reinforcing. Recognising and responding to what works and addressing what doesn't makes sense from the perspective of the organisation corporately and for individual members of staff. Understanding and then engaging in an on-going dialogue about what motivates and alienates people in the way that we do business will help us become a better organisation.
4. The diagnostic has evaluated our current culture to identify what is working well and some possible changes to our systems, processes, skills and behaviour to embed further an improvement culture. The overall question to which the assessment team has sought to provide a response is:

“How does the existing organisational culture need to develop to support and encourage, even more effectively, all staff being actively engaged with improving the effectiveness of all of our services?”

Why should we be interested in developing the culture of the organisation?

5. This is not uncharted territory – we know a good deal. As an organisation we have made significant strides forward and the Audit Commission see us as continuing to improve. The staff satisfaction survey contained generally positive results and showed considerable improvement in how the organisation is viewed by many of the people who work for it and Islington compares well now to other authorities. So why should we buy the argument that we need to think seriously about our culture – and why now?
6. **Culture can slow down or even nullify management initiatives to create changes in performance.** Culture mediates the way in which improvement will be delivered in practice. It can make new approaches sustainable - or not. So positive changes will make a difference to the performance of the organisation.
7. **If we are to be better for our residents,** satisfaction with services and the council depends very significantly on the way that staff across the council engage with and respond to users and residents. Many people who work for Islington are strongly motivated by doing a good job for the users of the services that they provide. However, if the Leader's vision of consistently high standards across the organisation is to be fulfilled that commitment needs to be sustained and extended.
8. What has been good enough will not remain so – we know that **the external environment is going to be tougher and will increasingly probe aspects of our culture.** The CPA and the inspection regime, the need to improve efficiency, to meet increasing aspirations from citizens and service users, offering greater choice and personalisation whilst managing expectations and costs, to work more effectively with partners and to lead the place as well as provide services are going to demand more from councils.
9. **The values and beliefs that make up our culture have a reciprocal relationship with performance management** (measurement and monitoring) – we need both to develop a more rounded “improvement culture”. So as the box below illustrates, action on performance management and culture need to be mutually reinforcing to maximise their impact in terms of how people are motivated; how they respond to demands for improved performance; and how they make use of performance management systems.

Culture and Performance

The relationship can be looked at in terms of the classic performance cycle of “plan – do – review – revise”, for example:

- a shared set of values, direction and a sense of ambition, some creativity and wide involvement (including between Departments), and decisiveness by leaders all support **planning**
- a sense of responsibility and ownership through an effective distribution of power and leadership; and the flexibility to respond to change creatively and in a supportive environment assist **doing**
- a willingness to reflect and learn and to challenge and be challenged – with support but also the expectation and the means by which people are held to account for their performance promotes **review**
- the ability to apply learning; innovation and creativity; ambition tempered by realism and an understanding of how change can be made to happen and what inspires people to do things differently are crucial to **revising**.

10. **The results in the staff survey can also be looked at less positively** - the council is not functioning well from everyone’s perspective. For example substantial numbers of people in the organisation have concerns about bullying and harassment and there are relatively low scores for the degree to which innovation and creativity are encouraged. The survey is also a passive tool – it does not necessarily allow people to give more considered responses or to address all of the topics that are on their mind. Nor does it allow a deeper understanding to be developed about why people feel as they do, or the opportunity to develop responses to improve the situation.

11. Finally, we need **to meet the challenge to move from “quick fix” to “stay fixed”**. In other words, there are in practice two ways to respond to a problem – fire fighting or preventing a repetition. Both say a lot about the nature of the organisation and about its use of resources. Investing in a stay fix solution has up front costs but substantial benefits – it involves addressing the set of skills, processes, equipment, behaviour etc issues that led to the problem occurring and addressing these as well as putting the immediate problem right. The box illustrates the consequences.

Quick Fix and Stay Fixed

A quick fix approach can be characterised as: every one works hard and is short of time; it is therefore only natural that mistakes will happen and not really any one's fault that the system failed; mistakes are largely unpredictable; so really all you can do is fix the immediate problem – not least because everyone is short of time.

A stay fixed approach might address things differently: look at what caused the problem with the aim of stopping a recurrence; initial thoughts about prevention are turned into action; changes are made to the system that generated the mistake or the problem so that fewer mistakes happen in the future; the act of staying fixed becomes one of working smarter not harder and releases time and resources for other things.

What has been driving the culture in Islington?

12. The council has made much of the description of being the fastest improving council in England. Positively, that emphasises that we are a great deal better than we were. Less so, we still see ourselves as on the upward curve rather than embedding being a good council *per se*. That matters in terms of perception and in terms of practice. In an external assessment there can be a very thin line between apparent success and failure with significant consequences for the way that the organisation views itself, albeit very little may have changed in practice.
13. The assessment of the council as poor in terms of the CPA was a shock to the system that stimulated change. Major decisions were taken and implemented. There is an overriding sense that we do not want to be seen by others in that way again. The process of achieving rapid improvement has been one characterised to a significant degree by strong top-down leadership and a relentless focus on making the changes that are needed to improve our assessment by the Audit Commission. There appears to be general acceptance within the organisation that this was a necessary approach. The question now is whether it is sufficient or desirable in the next phase of our improvement journey.

At the start of the process the assessment team put together a list of similes that might describe the council.

One of these was that the council had some of the characteristics of a **phototropic plant** – responding to and growing strongly in the direction of the light being shone upon it and as a result burgeoning in some directions whilst remaining relatively restricted in others.

Another was that the speed regulation was not smooth – a bus ride in which movement was sometimes halted abruptly (perhaps a sort of “**ready, steady, stop**” approach) and at others the accelerator was pressed firmly to the floor without the engine having warmed up properly.

14. It has also had a number of consequences:

- the council has become good at “going for it”, ticking the box, hitting the target - adopting a pragmatic approach to doing so and talking up progress relentlessly. The effect is that these have become the dominant values for the council and that achieving the standards set by others is increasingly the test that we set ourselves
- the recent history of the council can suggest that change is something that happens when it is driven by external assessments rather than being part of the way in which business is done
- the effect of improved performance management has been to demonstrate progress – but this does not yet match how a number of people in the organisation actually feel. We know a lot more than we did about our performance but it is also easy to discern dissatisfaction, at all levels in the council, with an emphasis on feeding a corporate machine with information. These quite burdensome processes have become an end in themselves rather than expressing how the organisation sees itself or how services ought to be delivered for the benefit of the community.

The Role of the Assessment Team

15. That analysis suggests that we have successfully moved on over the last few years but not yet established what sort of organisation we want to be in the future. The vision recently set out by the Leader requires a culture that is increasingly focused on positive motivation of all members of staff – full and part time, permanent and temporary. It needs a shift beyond relatively low expectations of the organisation – more than being better than we were. Moving from what might crudely be termed “preventing

failure” to being more clearly concerned with encouraging improvement and promoting success means both talking and acting as a good organisation, not simply one that is improving. It needs the honesty to recognise the challenges in genuinely being good. It needs greater buoyancy and self-confidence across the organisation and a clearer sense of what a good organisation looks like for Islington council.

16. The work that the assessment team has done is intended to illustrate how we might now move forward to help realise that vision. It has encompassed a number of stages:

- assessing the **current culture within Islington** and what is working well and less well from the perspective of a range of staff and partners
- considering on the basis of the assessment findings what a **desired state** for the organisation might look like, the main features of which are set out in the box on page 14
- identifying some “**patterns of behaviour**” that seem to exemplify the most significant ways in which the current culture operates. Some of these show our strengths; others indicate that behaviour needs to change in order to facilitate further improvement
- making some **recommendations** for how we might move forward.

17. Details of the methodology that we have followed are at annex A. **The assessment is one that has been made by the assessment team whose members have been drawn from each of the council’s Departments.** It represents their judgments and recommendations on the basis of their interpretation of the findings from the data gathering exercise - given their knowledge of the council.

18. The process identified many aspects of the current culture that are viewed favourably by people within the organisation and which they would wish to retain in moving forward. However, it was felt by the Assessment Team that this report should predominantly focus on issues that may currently or in the future impede progress or undermine performance or where there are characteristics that need to be developed further.

The Assessment Themes

19. We have set out the main findings from the initial diagnostic work in 10 short thematic sections which are described in more detail in annex B. The assessment team identified these themes as the most important dimensions of the culture of the organisation. The main elements of these findings are set out in the following box. The findings for the themes are the basis for the remainder of the report.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

Leadership

Leadership in Islington is thought by many more junior staff to be a quality and role embodied in a small number of very senior officers.

Chief Officers and other senior managers are not visible to many members of staff.

Expectations of individuals' capacity to lead at more junior levels are perceived to be low.

Some staff explicitly drew a distinction between 'the leadership', as forward-looking and dynamic, and other parts of the organisation that refused to be led, or embrace a newer vision.

'One Islington' is well known but its implications are not always understood.

There is far less clarity about the values of the council (compared to the existence of One Islington).

Performance

For individuals, the most frequently cited motivational factors are the values and qualities that inspire them, such as the public service ethos, efficiency, trust, respect, freedom, and openness.

Unsurprisingly, most people want to be appreciated when they do good work.

Staff repeatedly complained about inconsistent and ineffective responses to poor performance at all levels of management. Many expressed

frustration about what they perceived as cumbersome processes for tackling poor performance.

There is considerable frustration about some members of staff who are perceived to be marking time, contributing little, frequently complaining and thus undermining morale and performance.

Many members of staff emphasised that there is within the council substantial untapped potential that could be developed and used, often in place of temporary staff and consultants.

There is a strong view, including among temporary staff, that there are too many people working here on a temporary basis, but also among temporary staff that they are under-appreciated.

There is a desire to do more to attract and keep good staff from graduate trainees to experienced senior staff.

Management

Management was most frequently characterised as hierarchical, micro-managing and ineffective.

Management is seen as having improved but still to need further improvement. In particular managers have tended to become absorbed in getting the work done, and have underplayed parts of their role, such as leadership, staff development and planning.

Decisions taken at the top of the organisation are not seen as being communicated clearly or fully.

Creativity and Innovation

Creativity and innovation are not seen as embedded and fostered throughout the council.

There is a perception that creativity is something that predominantly happens at more senior levels and in small pockets in the organization.

Communication

Communications within the council are widely thought to be improving.

There is a frequently voiced view that the council has a tendency to 'spin'.

The quality and approach to consultation with staff could be improved with more emphasis on feedback from such exercises

Staff expressed frustration about the perceived difficulty of being able to access senior managers.

Change

Staff want greater clarity about the forces driving change so that it could be better planned and implemented.

The pace of change is perceived very differently across the council but there is a strong perception that staff are not fully involved in change processes.

Many felt that the organisation is not particularly good at learning from its mistakes, but was happy to celebrate its successes.

Inter-Departmental working

There is a strong sense that the council still works predominantly in silos.

There is considerable concern about the consistency of the application of standards and processes across the council and that this is having an impact on both delivery and morale.

There is a perception of Departmental rivalry and some mistrust between the corporate centre and Departments that can reinforce silo working.

Systems and Skills

Systems and kit are “improved” but “still not there”.

Organisational change projects, such as smart working and payments systems, are seen as primarily focused on systems not culture.

Diversity

The understanding of diversity is highly variable – it is most frequently understood in terms of race, sexual orientation and disability. The experience of staff varies hugely from very positive to entirely unacceptable.

For some white staff, the issues about diversity were focused on equal opportunities policies in respect of recruitment and retention.

The findings support the results of the staff survey that bullying takes place in the council.

Outward Orientation

Some front line staff feel undervalued – they recognise that they are fundamentally important in terms of how the council is perceived by service users and residents but that this is underplayed.

Many staff think, and are concerned that, the council is frequently portrayed unfavourably in the local print media.

Desired State

20. From these findings for each of the 10 themes the assessment team distilled a number of characteristics of a “desired state” for the organisation. This confirms that many of the things that the council has been saying about how it wants to be are what staff would value.

21. The box below sets out a summary of the main elements – these inevitably vary from some wide general statements to some more specific aspects that relate quite clearly to the findings described in the previous section. We also compared the findings and existing policies to see how far the latter were supported and the main contrasts – the results are set out in annex C.

22. The four headings that have been used in grouping elements of the desired state reflect aspects of the culture to which particular emphasis is given by staff. These are clearer **values and vision**; greater **consistency**; more **confidence**; and greater **openness**.

Desired Future State

The characteristics described come from the findings in the assessment – many of them are already contained in statements of council policy and they build on high standards that Islington has already achieved in many areas of its work.

Values-led

Islington will:

- be committed to continuous improvement, user focus and equality of outcome for all residents.

- always operate fairly, openly and with integrity.

- have a diverse workforce reflecting and delivering to a diverse community.
- express what diversity means for Islington as a council and a place not on the basis of external requirements and engaged with transparently, strategically and enthusiastically
- not simply value what is measurable
- drive performance improvement through strategic vision, values and behaviours as well as measurement and monitoring systems
- base leadership and management on a set of commonly held values and behavioural standards
- develop staff who are empowered and trusted
- strive to be truly innovative and agile

Consistent

Islington will:

- disseminate and embed the good practice that currently exists in pockets throughout the organisation
- expect performance and service delivery to be of a consistently high standard across the organisation
- manage performance effectively everywhere
- make evidence based decisions, be clear when they have been taken and implement them once they have been made
- have structures, systems and processes that facilitate compliance and high performance which are consistently resourced across the organisation
- challenge non-compliance firmly but fairly
- have Departments that work collaboratively driven by user, citizen, customer and client needs.

Confident

Islington will:

- trust itself and its partners

- encourage staff at all levels in the organisation to have confidence in each other
- expect leadership to be shown at all levels and demonstrably distribute it both more widely and more deeply
- view change as something to be explored with staff and in which to secure their engagement
- have the confidence to experiment more widely, and both expect and enable staff to innovate and be creative
- acknowledge and reward creativity and innovation and managers empowered to manage risks effectively.

Open and accessible

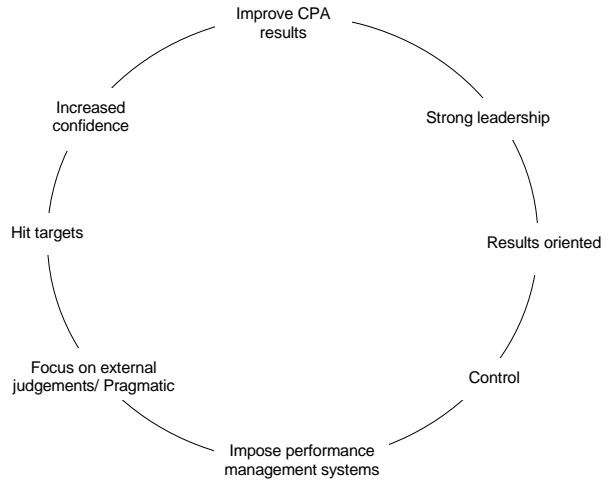
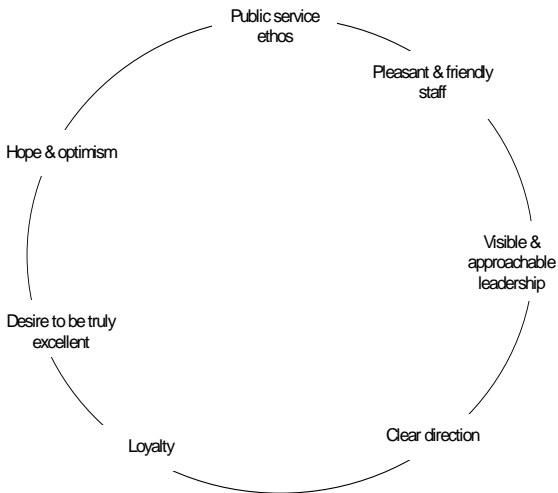
Islington will:

- communicate frankly with staff and engage in open dialogue with partners, contractors and the public
- be open to challenge
- have a leadership style that is open, relaxed, creative and adaptable.

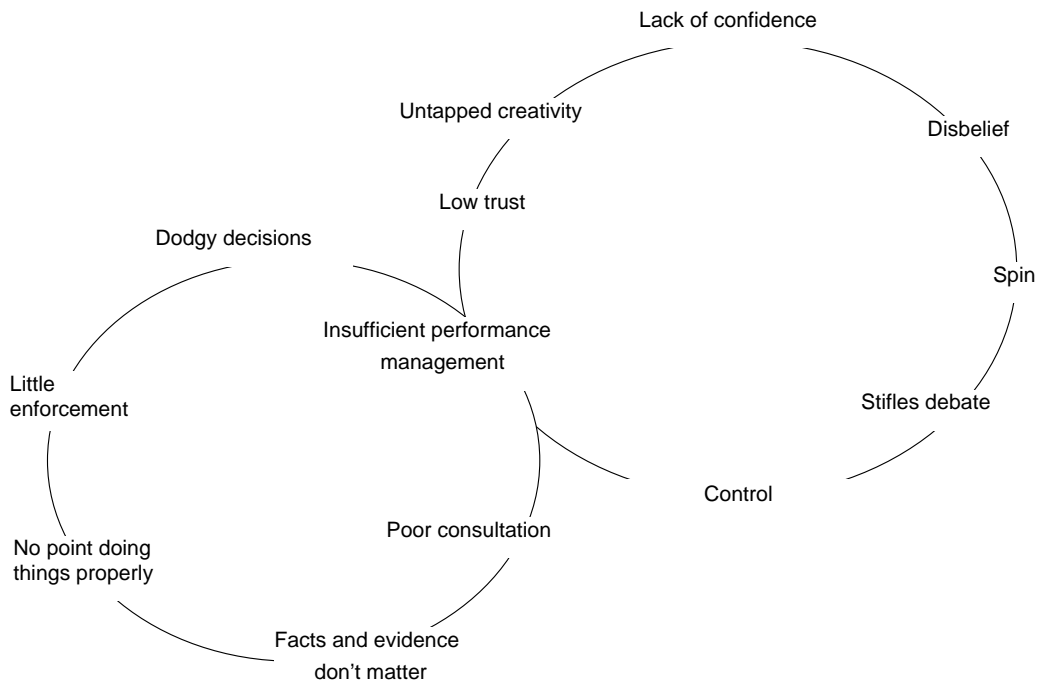
Some “Patterns of Behaviour”

23. From the 10 themes the Assessment Team clustered some characteristics into some examples of ‘patterns of behaviour’ to draw out that there are dependencies and relationships within and between a number of the findings.

24. Two of these identify some of the very positive behaviours that can be found within the organisation and which exemplify the characteristics that have been evident in moving the council forward strongly in recent years. One is focused on the strong emphasis on public service and a desire to be excellent; the second on the pragmatic and adaptable nature of the council and its focus on achieving results.

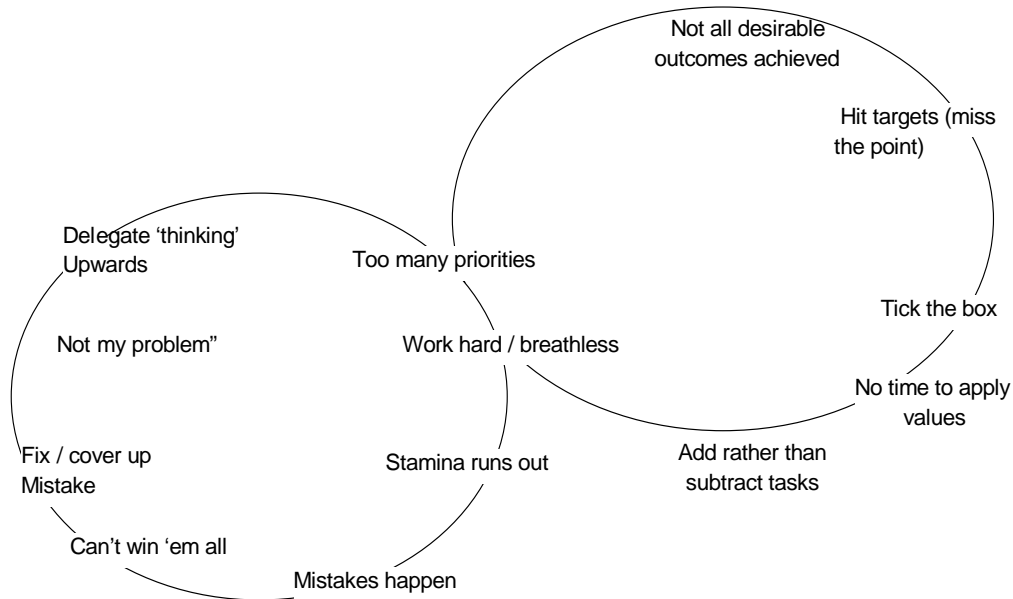


25. There are also some patterns that are almost the mirror image of some of these characteristics and which also reflect the four headings in the desired state. The first set of patterns focus on the effect of poor performance management – the one on the left reflecting some of the characteristics associated with the need for greater consistency and compliance and that on the right the need for more openness and trust.



26. The second set of patterns focus on the effect of having too many priorities - the one on the right reflects some of the characteristics associated with the need for greater confidence and the one on the left by the lack of space for applying a

broader set of values beyond achieving specific targets and ticking particular boxes.



Recommendations

27. This assessment has identified many ways in which to change the culture of the council. Recognition and expression of the perceptions and beliefs of the people who work here is the first step and helps to develop a vision about what kind of organization we would like to be.

28. To change beliefs, however, requires people to see things happening in a different way. We need to establish both the expectation that certain issues will be addressed and the confidence that those who do address them will be supported. That needs sustained effort and it needs to recognize that what the most senior leaders say and do sets the tone for the organization. It also needs to challenge some of the less positive patterns of behaviour that we have identified, perhaps particularly 'hitting the target and missing point'; improving the clarity of decision-making, openness and avoiding a tick box approach to managing delivery.

29. **Accordingly, we recommend that:**

The Chief Executive, CMB and those who report to CMB should:

- **commit to the following outcomes;**

- **give each other the freedom and flexibility to achieve them; and**
- **hold each other to account for their efforts with feedback from staff forming an integral part of that process.**

The outcomes are:

- **poor performance and behaviour of individuals, teams and services should be tackled - by all those who are responsible and accountable for that performance - promptly, effectively and in a manner which is sensitive to the dignity of others**
- **decisions and priorities should be clear and clearly implemented (including when something is not a priority)**
- **fair treatment and equality of outcome for all members of staff should be sought in implementing working practices (e.g. in reaching judgements on individual performance, access to training and development, inclusion in informal networks, on flexi time, parental leave, and sickness absence)**
- **leadership and creativity should be expected and supported at all levels within the council**
- **diversity and equality should be promoted and communicated in terms of what is needed in Islington as a council and a place**
- **senior managers should be open with each other and with their staff about what is working and what needs to change.**

30. Holding to account is a fundamental element of this recommendation. Giving and expecting feedback on how in practice these outcomes are being pursued needs itself to exemplify a change in culture. There should be an expectation of challenge when these outcomes are not being achieved and examples of where action is being taken should be communicated and promoted to reinforce our collective commitment.

31. There would also be merit in looking at progress in 12 months time to gauge progress and the scope for further extension of this approach within the council.

32. There is also a major opportunity to use the findings from this assessment to set the tone for engagement between staff across the organisation. The assessment team found that most people genuinely want to know where we are going and why – and that at the moment many of them are uncertain about where pressure for change comes from. The pace of change is perceived very differently in different parts of the council and between different groups of staff. In the view of the assessment team openness about what has been found and frankness and realism about what can be done to move forward would be a

promising harbinger of what could be achieved more generally in changing the culture of the organisation.

ANNEX A: METHODOLOGY

The project was run by an assessment team drawn from across the council with the support of two consultants – Jon Harvey and Kate Dixon – from OPM.

The process involved:

- establishing the assessment team as the body to oversee the process of analysis and to agree the framework for gathering and analysing data (the 10 assessment themes)
- undertaking a data gathering exercise through working with staff drawn from across the council in a series of focus groups to ascertain their views on each of the assessment themes, capturing what they would keep or drop about the current culture and what they would wish to see amplified or introduced. The focus groups were established around different interests – middle managers in a number of Departments, front line staff, professionals, temporary and agency staff and new joiners.
- giving all staff opportunities to give their views through a small number of graffiti boards and some drop-in sessions
- conducting some in-depth interviews with individuals including representatives of partner organisations
- analysing the findings from the data gathering by assessment theme with the results being discussed and agreed by the assessment team
- using the assessment team to draw conclusions from the initial data gathering by holding two intensive sessions for a “force field” analysis of each theme (which involves developing from the initial analysis a deeper understanding of the current and desired state and the forces that both promote and restrain progress towards it)
- using the results of the force field process to develop critical aspects of this report – the patterns of behaviour, the desired state and the main recommendation.

The members of the assessment team were: Zena Cooke, Simon Daisley, Peter Fehler, Natalie Howard, Maria King, Lela Kogbara, Kevin Lloyd, Gerald Mehrtens, Andy Murphy, Jane Simmonds, Adrian Smith, Andrew Stephens and Chris Worby.

ANNEX B: DETAILED FINDINGS FROM THE ASSESSMENT

1. The following sections set out the main findings for each of the themes.

LEADERSHIP

Nature and style of leadership

2. **Leadership in Islington is thought by many more junior staff to be a quality and role embodied in a small number of very senior officers.** We heard mixed views about the nature of leadership in the council, which ranged from 'controlling' to 'approachable', 'very positive' and 'inspirational'. However these views seemed to be largely a response to individuals, not to an understanding of leadership as a cultural phenomenon that may be manifested throughout the organisation in a multiplicity of ways.

3. Some felt that Chief Officers and other senior managers needed to be **more visible** lower down the organisation in order to forge connections with the wider staff body. Chief officers were thought to be remote and the organisation was often characterised as 'hierarchical'. Others commented that Directorates assumed the characteristics of their Director, at times to the detriment of effective working across the Council. CMB were thought not to own sufficiently corporate decisions.

4. Concerns were also expressed about a mutual lack of trust among and between different levels in the organisation, which narrowed the space for and responsiveness to leadership. One aspect of this is the perception that accountability and responsibility are not currently appropriately placed or distributed. Avoiding blame remains a significant driver at all levels. **Expectations of individuals' capacity to lead further down the organisation were very low** and support was largely unavailable.

5. There was recognition that the leadership style of Chief Officers was a response to Islington's poor performance in the past. Equally there was an expectation that improved performance could allow space for a different and more distributed style of leadership in the future. The improvement in performance was achieved in part through a relentless focus on pushing forward, to the extent that the organisation has become 'breathless'. It was now thought to need some 'stamina' in order to shift gear again.

6. However, while the organisation has made great progress, some parts of it are lagging behind. **Some staff explicitly drew a distinction between 'the leadership', as forward-looking and dynamic, and large parts of the organisation that refused to be led, or embrace the newer vision.** It's like *'attaching the head of a modern animal to a dinosaur.'*

Vision and values

7. While some felt that the vision of the organisation is very clear, others remain confused and/or sceptical. **‘One Islington’ was well known but its implications were not always understood and some felt that it did not encompass all of the Council’s work.** There was a desire for more clarity about the plans for how the vision will be achieved.

‘The message around One Islington is very clear and we have taken a much more corporate approach to our work lately which I think is a very positive step.’

‘Islington has clear values including customer focus, sustainability and regeneration but whether they are recognised and bought into by staff depends on individuals.’

‘There seem to be several ‘One Islingtons’.’

8. **There was far less clarity around values.** For some these were embodied in the Ways of Working, for others they did not exist in tangible form or consisted of competing clusters. For example, some felt that the organisation espoused the values of the private sector, as opposed to public service or at the very least that there was a gap between professed and practiced values.

‘There are clear values but a lot of it comes across as lip service and buzzwords. For example, we say we are committed to sustainability and recycling but how much do we as a council actually recycle ourselves. It’s a bit do as I say, not as I do.’

PERFORMANCE

9. In addition to the external drivers of improvement from CPA, ISO and liP, and central government, partners’ and the community’s expectations; two powerful internal forces were evident – the public service ethos and a desire at all levels within the organisation for performance improvement.

What inspires and motivates staff?

10. Some of what motivates staff is about personal interest, such as money, and relationships with colleagues and managers. Some of it is about external factors such as competition with other boroughs, departmental awards, effective leadership and credible new policies for individual services. However, **most frequently, individuals spoke of values and qualities that inspire, such as the public service ethos, efficiency, trust, respect, freedom, and openness.**

11. **Many staff were also keen to be appreciated for good work** – hence the high popularity of birthday leave. While some felt that good performance is recognised and rewarded, others felt overlooked. A few argued for more stretching targets so as to distinguish excellent from mediocre performance. Many staff wanted both individuals and teams to be acknowledged for good performance, for example with a congratulatory email, cakes, employee of the year award etc.

'The one thing that motivated people the most recently was the birthday leave we were given when we got to 'good'. My team were over the moon about that.'

'The things that motivate people are: pride in their jobs; a pat on the back; being part of a team. ... I know many people who work extra hours without payment just because they genuinely want to be part of something good.'

12. There were mixed views on the value of staff awards and on PRP – seen as a good motivator by some, but by others as unfair and potentially de-motivating. However, there was agreement that grade points should be discretionary, not just on years of service, provided fairness could be ensured.

Responding to poor performance

13. Current performance was seen as having improved but still to a fairly low level. For many there was a clear link between the scope for further improvement and the continued presence of a core of under-performing – and sometimes misbehaving – staff. This was seen to be a critical issue for the council, which requires urgent attention, since the failure to address poor performance was impacting on both morale and service delivery.

14. **Staff repeatedly complained about inconsistent and ineffective responses to poor performance at all levels of management.**

'There are not enough comebacks when people don't do what they say they will. This means that there is little incentive to do a good job. Some staff will do a good job anyway because they are motivated and have that work ethic already instilled. However the organisation is not actively fostering this attitude.'

'Islington is the most pleasant council I've worked at, everyone is very nice and the atmosphere is very relaxed but the downside of this is that when people should be disciplined they aren't.'

'Everywhere else I have worked you would have been sacked for the things some people do.'

'Too many people are not good enough all of the time.'

15. Many identified unwillingness among managers to challenge poor performance - some staff are seen as fending off criticism and some managers as preferring to bury or move the 'problem' rather than address it.

'There are actually more benefits for a member of staff that under performs versus a member of staff that does perform well. If you under perform you are not sacked. Instead you are moved around within the department/directorate and given an easier job on the same salary, where your lack of performance will have less of an impact (damage limitation). Your work is shared amongst those staff that are left and are performing well. If you deliver, your workload will increase. If you don't the worst that happens is that you are asked to do less work.'

16. Managers and staff both expressed frustration about the apparently cumbersome processes for tackling poor performance or sacking staff.

'HR seems very risk averse, problems just get passed on. It might be because of a fear of legislation or tribunals, but this attitude breeds resentment as people who do work hard see their colleagues not working to the same ethic and yet nothing being done about it, which isn't very motivating.'

'I think some of our HR issues need to be reviewed. There is a bit of a grievance culture here, which takes up manager's time and can be used as a means to obstruct performance management. We never seem to be able to just call time on performance issues and be firmer about our rights and responsibilities as an employer. Managers get undermined. We are expected to performance manager but we aren't given the tools to do this.'

16. A number of staff are very frustrated by colleagues who they frequently described as 'old school'. One staff member described the council as "a Rolls Royce engine pulling a model T Ford". 'Old school' colleagues in the model T Ford are perceived to be marking time, contributing little, frequently complaining and thus undermining morale – and performance.

'Some staff, especially those who've been here a long time, are very cynical, they think they've heard it all before. The problem is that they influence newer staff with their attitudes who could otherwise have bought into our culture.'

'Some are progressive – Helen Bailey – but there is resistance and others feel she's going too fast. She sets a standard that others don't or can't live up to.'

'The culture was different when they started here in the 70's and 80's. It frustrates me. They come in, make a cup of tea, have a chat, make another cup of tea, have another chat and then maybe do a little bit of work. They see their job as a way to pay for their lifestyle and aren't interested in a career. The rest of us have to tiptoe around them.'

Getting and keeping staff

17. As an employer competing for a limited pool of talent, staff acknowledged that Islington must be an attractive place to work. The council should aspire to recruit highly talented people who want to make a difference to the local community, as well as developing the potential of staff internally.

18. There was a keen appetite for better career paths, especially for more junior and administrative staff. **Staff emphasised that there was lots of untapped potential that could be developed and used within the organisation:**

'We don't do a skills audit – if we did we would be amazed at the staff we have – we could use what we have more.'

'If you don't see progression in your job role – for example as an administrator - you are stuck and have no reason to invest in it.'

19. Numerous examples were given of jobs being inappropriately 'ring-fenced' for particular candidates - *'There's a name on a job even if it is advertised'* – and concern that some opportunities are not advertised. Morale is affected by inappropriate promotions (on the basis of longevity or favouritism or even in response to threats) or re-grading of posts.

'Many long serving staff have been over-promoted because they were simply in the right place at the right time.'

'Posts have been created for people just because they have threatened to leave and bullied the managers.'

'There's still not a close enough link between performance and reward – if you screw it up, you still might get promoted.'

20. Staff perceived turnover rates to be high, and **wanted more to be done to keep all good staff, from graduate trainees to experienced senior staff** - *'We need to be a bit more selfish about hanging onto good people.'*

Temporary staff and consultants

21. This was a subject of pressing interest to many - **both permanent and temporary members of staff share the view of there being too many temporary staff in the council**. Permanent staff tended to object on the grounds

that temporary staff received higher rates of pay for equivalent work, had high turnover rates (although in fact some had been employed for years) and might be trained only to leave to find a better-paid job elsewhere. Temporary staff sometimes shared the concern about the impact on council budgets, but many also felt marginalised by the organisation citing lack of feedback and equipment and finding that their contribution was overlooked.

22. Permanent staff are also often doubtful about the value of consultants, preferring instead to draw on the skills of internal staff. They tended to view the employment of consultants as expensive, unnecessary and reducing the opportunities for permanent staff. Some believed that the use of consultants indicated Islington's lack of confidence in itself – external 'experts' were used to give validity to a case, which was perceived to be less strong if based on arguments constructed by staff only.

'There is some resentment around consultants. Some are very good but then they leave and they take the knowledge with them so it is lost. We need to think more about using permanent staff on key projects, through acting up opportunities etc.'

Appraisal process

23. There were mixed views of the appraisal process, with HR staff positive about its benefits, and most other staff critical of appraisals in themselves and/ or of the new system. Those who are dubious about the value of appraisals observed that they were not used proactively enough to support development and improvement or to challenge poor performance and that they are not taken seriously enough by managers. The process itself was thought to be complicated and awkward to complete – *'you shouldn't have to shoehorn people's work into the WOW boxes'*.

'Despite having the appraisal system many staff are standing still within the organisation. They live for their yearly increments. Why aren't appraisals dealing with this? We need a clear message from the very top that we have high expectations of all staff and we need them to demonstrate that if these expectations are not met that there are consequences.'

What is noticed and what gets measured?

24. Some of the pressures are external – and largely political, such as local media, issues of concern to members, 'killer PIs', and CPA. Interest is also paid, in a more positive sense, to activities/ outcomes to do with any new central Government initiative with money attached.

25. In relation to individual performance, staff spoke of *'quantity not quality'*, *'small aggravating mistakes'*, *'turnaround time and quality'*, and *'delivery'*. There was some suspicion that performance figures were not being used effectively, and that the emphasis on targets obscures questions of quality. Managers spoke of the difficulty of monitoring quality when caseloads are very high, while some staff wanted the quality of their performance to be probed more deeply to ensure that they were being judged fairly.

Management Style

26. The focus of comments was about people management. **The most frequently cited management characteristics were hierarchical, micro managing and ineffective.** Some staff are frustrated about the lack of access to more senior managers, which often appeared to them to reflect a lack of trust between different levels within the council.

'There's less flexibility and fluidity in this organisation compared to others – people build false ceilings.'

27. Managers were seen to be afraid to take risks and hampered by feeling that the corporate message is that *'everything is a priority'*. **Managers tend to become absorbed in getting the work done, and abandon parts of their role, such as leadership, staff development and planning.**

Managers are responsible for the blame culture because they have a fear of accepting responsibility and are avoiding criticism.

People are insecure which makes them into control freaks and a needing to show results at the expense of engagement and creativity.

28. Some managers were thought to be ineffective at building successful working relationships with their staff. Bullying appeared to emerge from insecurity, lack of competence and lack of trust in staff – and out of a fear of being blamed for mistakes. Bullying by others was also tolerated by some managers, who seemed to be reluctant to intervene.

'Remove culture where people who express an opinion are marginalised and not valued.'

'Verbal bullying is openly ignored by management, you are just expected to survive.'

Management capacity

29. Some detected an improvement in management within the council - *'Staff management has massively improved in the last two to three years.'*; *'The majority of managers are very motivated and few are cynical - and many wanted to be managed more effectively. However, there remained considerable dissatisfaction - improvement is seen to be hampered by the lack of a clear concept of management competencies, inappropriate appointments on the basis of personal relationships and longevity and, most frequently, lack of management and leadership skills:*

'I think that there are quite a few managers here who don't have the skills and knowledge to motivate people. They've been placed in position, often because they were in the right place at the right time, but with no people management experience. They find it hard to commit to and promote the values and this has a knock-on effect.'

'They are not leaders in the true sense of the word – can't help you develop or give you a sense of direction. You can't give the respect they crave because the trust isn't there.'

30. There was, however, also recognition that managers are judged primarily against their ability to 'deliver', making it hard to devote the necessary time and energy to managing people. The council is thought to be intolerant of perceived weaknesses. **There also appeared to be a lack of clarity about how to interpret many corporate policies.**

'Managers don't do it because they are not acknowledged to support people's management or development. Should be about recognising that managing people is part of what is needed for better delivery. If you don't value something in an organisation, people don't prioritise it. The message seems to be - forget management just meet the target.'

'We are clear on how we want people to behave but we haven't told people how to tell other people.'

31. Management weaknesses can go undetected at more senior levels *'There is no means for anyone to give feedback about management – or at least only occasionally and it is not anonymous so that won't work.'*

How decisions are made

32. As noted earlier, staff tended to see the organisation as hierarchical, and sometimes found that the hierarchy obscured the decision-making process. **Decisions taken at senior levels were sometimes not communicated clearly or fully to the rest of the organisation.**

'There is a good feeling in my team. It's hierarchical, but it doesn't feel oppressive.'

'Decision-making happens at the top levels and the organisation itself is very hierarchical. Junior staff are not empowered to make decisions and this means projects are protracted. It also means senior staff are putting themselves under a lot of pressure. Decisions are not always well considered because very senior staff simply have too much to do. They are not utilising the staff they have below them. Real lack of trust.'

33. Others misuse the hierarchy: *'When people don't get what they want (even if they haven't got it because those concerned are following corporate guidelines) many will go straight to Helen and get it approved. This really undermines managers authority.'*

34. While some middle-ranking and more junior managers sought greater autonomy, others thought that they did not receive enough support and direction from those above them.

'Sometimes I, and some of my colleagues, feel that senior managers wash their hands of responsibility and take the stance of 'you're the line manager, you sort it out'. This doesn't seem to be the right attitude.'

35. Decision-making was also characterised as lacking adequate planning and sustained commitment – when managers changed, or more senior managers were brought into the process, decisions were often seen to be reversed, which staff found unsettling and unnecessary.

'Decision-making is too often reactive and not planned sufficiently. Many initiatives are not funded sufficiently (particularly where training is required).'

'Drop delays and flip flopping in decision making.'

CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

36. **It is apparent that creativity and innovation are not embedded and fostered everywhere and even seem to be discouraged in some places.** Staff had very different experiences depending on their directorate or team. Some thought that the organisation was 'timid' and 'resistant' (*'We're very risk averse', 'creativity is seen as eccentricity.'*); others that it was 'highly tolerant' (*'Allowed to get on with it', 'Trust is very high'; 'We teach others'; 'I'm told by my manager I will stand by you providing you can explain why you are doing something.'*).

37. There is also a sense of **creativity as something that predominantly happens at more senior levels:**

'The council is like a train - In the 1st carriage there is creativity, initiative etc that comes from being in control and driving the direction; as you go further down people just follow and lots end up getting off the train. Need to move away from an elitist train and have engagement from managers to people below them. There is a need to value low-grade staff and look at how their creativity and initiative can be fostered. The back office/back carriages need some investment.'

38. Various stimuli to creativity were identified - when things are going wrong or to help meet a target, are cost neutral or lead to savings.

'Creativity and innovation are tolerated rather than encouraged. Managers have a 'why should we' attitude to new ideas. The benefits of new ideas have to be explicit before managers are willing to embark upon them. Often benefits will not be explicit until change has been implemented.'

39. The tendencies towards micro management were thought to get in the way of creative thinking, both by restricting the scope for creativity and by encouraging aversion to risk

'Some people don't feel empowered, they are afraid of responsibility. If something goes wrong they are afraid of the consequences. This fear means that people don't gain experience and learn from successes and mistakes. This affects some managers too. Helen gives a good example though, she takes ownership for her actions and admits she makes mistakes, that she isn't infallible. She leads by example.'

'Hierarchies are barriers to creativity. Staff are not empowered to make any decisions. Too much has to be agreed by ADs and Directors.'

Impact of directorial/ departmental/ personal culture

40. As noted above, **many staff believe that senior managers shape the space available to them in which to do their job.** Some experience that space as circumscribed and process-driven, others as more flexibly defined and open to development.

'In my department staff are actively encouraged to come up with ideas, own them, run them and get the credit for them. This is not the case elsewhere.'

'There is a heavy directive management culture here – this may have been necessary for increasing CPA score but excessive direction can lead to bullying and stifling creativity. To be an excellent authority staff need to be

more involved in planning their own work and able to show their creativity and innovation.'

41. The scope for creativity and innovation is to a certain extent proscribed by role *'[junior staff] are only thought about in relation to the role that they do, not their potential'*.

COMMUNICATION

42. This section deals primarily with corporate and departmental communications, consultation with staff and communication with and by senior managers. Other forms of interpersonal communication are touched on in other themes, such as 'diversity' and 'performance'.

Communication style

43. **Communication within the Council is widely thought to be improving and in some cases working exceptionally well.** Importantly, these positive comments relate both to the systems and style of communication.

'Comms has improved a lot.'

'The communication on 7 July was excellent. Really concise and just told us what we needed to know. My manager called me to check we were all OK and the team volunteered to help. There was also a buddy system in place for lone workers so they were called and knew what was going on. It was great.'

'It was great when (Helen) came to all the offices on the day of the good CPA score.'

44. There is also a reasonable degree of consensus about what is working less well. **The most frequent criticism – which was made a large proportion of staff we spoke to – was of the Council's tendency to 'spin'**, (a view in fact reinforced by comments in the last CPA inspection). Staff advocated more open dialogue internally – while achievements should be celebrated, average performance should not be 'talked up'. *'Too much saying we are fantastic', 'Too much spin and praising ourselves', 'Not open enough about problems.'*

45. The two most significant failings of current dissemination processes relate to an **over reliance on both cascading information** through tiers and **on email**. The 'cascading' approach was thought to result in delayed, incomplete and sometimes inaccurate information being delivered to staff – and on occasion no information reaching more junior staff at all.

Consulting staff

46. **There was some discontent about the quality and approach to consultation with staff.** Some felt that they were not consulted frequently enough about issues that affect them. One frequently cited example was the smoke free Islington policy. Staff – both smokers and non-smokers - objected both to the policy and to its introduction without consultation. It was also noted that the inclusion of the announcement in Council pay slips meant that temporary and contract staff were not directly informed of the new policy. There appeared to be relatively low levels of trust in the consultation processes used, and in the willingness to act on staff feedback.

'Staff don't think they can own or influence the decision making process.'

'With SMART working, a questionnaire was sent round. One felt that if you weren't enthusiastic about it you would be viewed as cynical.'

47. Others identified a willingness on the part of **some of their colleagues to disengage from the process** and to decline involvement in any shared decision making process - *'Some staff don't say anything when asked, then moan afterwards.'*

48. Staff wished to be consulted on current priorities and to be given opportunities to participate in developing solutions. **They were also keen to receive better and more consistent feedback about the outcomes of consultation processes.**

'Junior staff members of staff have very few real opportunities to channel ideas and what is suggested is not taken on board - consultation for the sake of it.'

'Need to provide feedback and publish to the wider Council where staff members have successfully contributed to developing a solution to a problem / requirement.'

'I feel well informed about change but I'm not sure whether people in buildings away from the Town Hall and MO do.'

Communication channels

49 There were positive comments about Izzi, the Members Bulletin and IC News – *'IC news is good; everyone in the team reads it when they have a spare minute'* although a few thought that it was strongly associated with the Town Hall.

50. There was general recognition of the value of face-to-face contact and familiar concerns about information overload and emails (too many and excluding

some due to lack of access or familiarity with the technology), but also the proliferation of different communication channels and publications conveying mostly the same information.

'The communication is good but it just depends on time.'

'Some people in outlying offices never receive an email and have never seen Izzie and this can make them feel very undervalued.'

Communication with and by leadership/management

51. Staff expressed some frustration about the **difficulties in accessing more senior managers** which was attributed to a range of factors –

'You can't bypass your manager but then the manager can be the bottleneck. When you have been to your manager five times with a really good idea if they don't take it forward there's nowhere else to go.'

'Directors may say they have an open door policy but you can't get past their PA. If you try to take them at their word you don't see them for dust. And there are staff who don't know who the directors are.'

CHANGE

52. Change is thought to be managed better now, but with scope for ongoing improvement. Some of the drivers for change were thought to be external (the poor CPA result, politicians, and central government), others internal (a better working environment or improved delivery or restructuring as a response to poor performance). However **running through all of this is the view that staff thought that it was critically important for the organisation to understand the driving forces so that change could be better planned and implemented.** Planning of change was identified as a particular weakness currently.

53. Not surprisingly, there were different perceptions about the characteristics of change from 'consultative' and 'adventurous', to cautious, both 'too quick and too slow', and implemented 'patchily'. **The pace of change was commented on frequently** – and was tied into the decision-making culture of the organisation.

'So slow to get anything done – you think things are going forward and then realise nothing has happened for literally months. No sense of urgency or commitment.'

'We lurch towards change'

'The organisation is very reactive and too often moves the goal posts at the very last minute. We must improve our ability to plan effectively. This should be just as valued as our ability to react quickly. Excellent organisations can do both.'

54. **Improvements were largely attributed to greater direction from senior management**, although though this approach was thought now to need adapting:

'Change has happened through really good leadership'

'Change is filtered down from the above rather than from the ground upwards.'

'Directors are not always able to make the decisions they need to. Helen exercises tight control.'

55. Whilst senior managers were seen as providing the impetus for change and making decisions on processes and systems, **there appeared to be less leadership in the area of cultural change**. Departments and teams were expected to embed the new practices or structures, without a clear sense of how to do it – or, on occasion, why.

'CMB currently supports change by giving information on processes and systems, not how to change and develop behaviours and attitudes.'

'The vast majority of staff have no say about changes to their teams or the council.'

'We have come on in leaps and bounds in the last five years but everyone needs to feel involved, not just the Town Hall.'

56. Evidence from our own process suggests that when presented with the opportunity to engage with and initiate change, some decide not to – *'staff here are fed up with change.'*

Learning from successes and failures

57. A number of staff recounted very positive experiences of sharing learning about both successful and unsuccessful projects. Many staff, however, thought that the council was not particularly good at learning from its mistakes, but was happy to celebrate (if not proactively learn from) its successes.

'There is a culture of back patting within departments but at the very senior levels as well.'

'We are honest about the failures that we have addressed but not about our failures that we aren't doing anything about.'

'We don't have a "how interesting" approach to failure.'

58. Moreover, some managers appear to prefer to give tasks to high achievers rather than tackle poor performance – *'If we find something successful we dump more in that area.'*

59. Others did not have formal opportunities to discuss issues with colleagues or their manager, and had to rely on their own initiative, or keep their own counsel - *'Learning happens to individuals.'*

INTERDEPARTMENTAL WORKING

60. The Council is thought by many to operate frequently as a series of silos. There can be great value in strong departmental cultures, where these give staff a positive sense of identity that, in turn, gives them the confidence to integrate well with other departments. Where inter-Departmental working operates well this is attributed to individual leadership and strong personal relationships as well as commitment to residents and the effect of some Government initiatives e.g. LAAs, neighbourhoods and efficiency.

61. There can be less positive effects if, as many feel, self interest and protectionism limits collective action. **Departmental rivalry and some mistrust between the centre and the services can reinforce silo working.** The budget and planning processes, volume of priorities and lack of shared vision, goals and values also constitute substantial barriers to more collaborative modes of delivery. Inter-departmental working is thought to be often forced rather than voluntary, and also lacking in coherence because it is not led or encouraged by senior managers.

Ways of working

62. **There is concern about the consistency in the application of standards and processes across the council and that this is impacting on delivery as well as morale.** There is an expectation that colleagues should operate in similar ways to comparable standards – lack of compliance with corporate or behavioural standards affects the appetite for more co-operation. Staff therefore tended to support greater coherence and compliance across the Council with corporate policies, with less room for manager's discretion.

'Interdepartmental can be frustrating as acceptable ways of working are not explicit. For example some departments will take anything up to two

weeks to respond to an email. In some departments this would be unacceptable in others it is commonplace. How can an organisation work effectively with such different interpretations of what is an acceptable way to work?’

‘We need to stop the ‘not my department’ attitude.’

Those occupying out-lying premises are often thought to have little if any awareness of the Council’s wider business, aspirations and challenges.

Knowledge sharing

63. One of the most striking barriers to knowledge sharing is the lack of a single comprehensive database of all (including temporary) staff, accessible to all staff and with a clearer sense of who is responsible for what. In relation to projects, there were similar frustrations. A formal system of recording project information and regular networking/ dissemination events would provide opportunities to reflect on and learn from successes and failures. Examples were given of failures to share information internally, so that work is duplicated or insufficiently dovetailed, or conflicting advice given. These failures were seen to damage Islington’s reputation externally.

‘One edition of the Prevue cinema magazine.... contained four adverts for different Islington council services, provided by different directorates across the council. All in completely different formats and styles. For the interviewee these adverts represent the disparate and silo manner that departments and directorates operate in. The right hand certainly doesn’t know what the left hand is doing.’

SYSTEMS AND SKILLS

64. **Islington’s systems and kit are often thought to be ‘hugely improved’ but ‘still not there’.** Individual champions and experts are seen to lead the way, bringing about striking developments in certain areas, but strategic direction is missing. There were some, arguably predictable, complaints about excessive bureaucracy. It was also suggested that the systems do not suit non-office based staff, or outlying satellite offices. There were also some indications that the biggest gap is around skills rather than staff. Although others were of a different view – one partner, for example, noted: *‘You don’t have a skills gap like in other boroughs where this can be very evident.’*

65. There is some dissatisfaction with the **working environment**. The lack of space for meeting and networking, poor temperature control and the breakdown

of basic services such as toilets and heating systems were most frequently mentioned. The constricted and fragmented quality of the council's office space was seen to have an impact on, for example, communication, creativity and inter-departmental working.

66. There was also considerable criticism of the accommodation review and smart working plans. Some welcome the flexibility offered through smart working, others were concerned that it was a '*charter for shirkers*', which would overburden those who worked in the office and undermine team working and efficiency. In some parts of the council, the implementation of smart working has been a success 'because people really believe it'. However, in common with some other examples of organisational change projects, such as payments systems, **the project is seen to be primarily about systems not culture.**

67. Staff who had arrived recently were critical of the **induction** process. Some, particularly temporary staff, had received no induction at all. Others were given a handover or induction to their role, but given no information about the council as a whole, or about issues such as health and safety and other essential policies. '*There were boxes under my desk when I arrived, and no computer. No induction either.*'

68. Staff argued that the **training** needs of individuals and for the organisation need to be assessed and responded to more proactively by managers. There was some support for secondments, PASP and other self-development opportunities, although a number of staff were concerned about equity of access to these opportunities. Temporary staff argued that they should be given training when needed for their role. A number of staff wanted more transparency about the process of allocating training places, suspecting favouritism by managers and wishing that colleagues lacking particular skills could be required to undertake appropriate training. Staff also wanted more information on the courses available and a consistently better standard of training. Finding time and or resources appeared difficult for some.

'The recruitment pack says that all staff are entitled to 5 days training but this is not always the case in reality. This is because of a mixture of managers not encouraging their staff due to lack of resources and the individual themselves not being motivated.'

69. Some staff had very positive experiences of receiving **support** - '*The scope and support for learning here is excellent. I've known people who couldn't read or write and the council paid for them to learn at work, now they're computer literate as well*'- while others observed that the opportunities for support were available, but not always used. A few staff felt that more support was needed – '*I am from a different generation and I genuinely embrace change and new ideas but I'm not able to just pick things up immediately without support.*'

70. On IT improvements have been clearly recognised but there remain concerns about systems which are not fit for purpose; reliance on on-line systems (e.g. appraisals) before skills levels had caught up; about some aspects of internal customer service; an absence of strategic direction and the skills gap identified in the e-culture review:

'A new system arrives and staffs just gets thrown into using it without training so instead of saving us time it just adds more pressure as we get stressed out about trying to use it. When you ask someone to help you they say It's not my job' so you are stuck and that can be frustrating. Sometimes even the person who is supposed to be able to help you only works part time or doesn't in reality know the system very well themselves and yet no one wants to take responsibility.'

DIVERSITY

Approach/ commitment to diversity

71. The understanding of 'diversity' varied considerably among staff of different backgrounds, seniority and departments. **A significant proportion of the white staff we spoke to spoke about the issue primarily in the context of equal opportunities policies regarding recruitment and retention.** Other staff generally understood the concept in terms of race, sexual orientation and disabilities. There were no substantive comments made in relation to the other equalities strands of age, gender and religion.

72. There is a very wide range of views on the council's approach and commitment ranging from '*Poorly*'; '*Without role models*', '*Good on paper – reality?*', '*Tentatively*'; '*Very PC culture driven*', '*Battle is already won*', '*The council feels very open*', '*this is the first place I've worked where it seems to be taken seriously*'; '*The council buys in to the agenda very well – no reason to disbelieve it promotes diversity widely*'; '*Good at it but stop going on about it.*'

73. Current Government policy and legal requirements were thought to have stimulated further progress and there was felt to be genuine goodwill in the council on diversity - existing policies, such as Dignity for All, were viewed positively, albeit some felt that these policies were not sufficiently embedded.

74. Some staff were concerned about unfair advantages; in particular over-promotion. Some managers were thought to take diversity seriously, others to pay it little attention or to see it as a '*tick box exercise*'.

Composition of Council Staff

75. The council was thought to have made great strides in changing the demographic mix of council staff although it was not visibly diverse enough at higher levels, particularly for BME groups. Recruitment processes could be improved still further to shift recurrent demographics or *'types we like'* in certain types of occupation or teams - *'We are very serious about equality and diversity but things cut across the success of it. Like the way we employ staff through agencies and the number of consultants we have.'*

Bullying and harassment

76. **Our findings support those of the staff survey, namely that bullying does occur in the council.** There was concern that senior managers and HR should take more of a lead. Examples of reported or directly experienced bullying by council officers were given by staff and one partner. In some cases, bullying was targeted at particular groups – those mentioned were BME, homosexual and more junior female staff. The activities involved included derogatory comments, 'molesting women' and the ostracism of certain staff members.

'The culture I work in is a hard place to be, you have to be very thick skinned. There is very little trust on each side. People seem suspicious, insincere. I get asked questions about my life out of work as if they are trying to work out whether I'm up the job. People from ethnic communities are used to this, they've had this kind of thing all their lives.'

Equalities strands

77. The council was recognised to have worked hard to boost its commitment to LGBT individuals - *'I think the work we do around LGBT issues is very good', 'There's quite a lot going on for them, isn't there?'* (the latter, though, is a rather double edged comment). However, homophobia was considered to remain relatively prevalent, and perhaps more importantly, tolerated within the organisation.

'I think we've come a long way in helping people from LGBT communities feel comfortable but I still know a few people who would never come out at work because they worry how they'd be treated by work colleagues.'

'Though there are events, I am still concerned by level of homophobia, which would be jumped on if the comments were about race.'

78. Some BME staff were enthusiastic about the council as an employer -

'This is why you most often find more black staff in areas like social services, housing and education – the strongest advertisement for a black person to

apply for a job is word of mouth, it sells the job. People are more likely to apply for a job where they can see that ethnic minorities are in place and welcomed, and so it becomes a pattern.'

However, BME staff in teams where the staff profile is predominantly white sometimes had a less comfortable experience -

' I am quite unusual as a black manager in x department; the majority are white. Often I feel that as I work on the support side, other managers assume that I am not a professional as they are the ones with the professional qualifications.'

In other cases, cultural as opposed to racial differences were seen as a barrier -

'Accepting diversity in the workforce is still a challenge – we have a lot of agency staff from South Africa and New Zealand, and some managers are reluctant to recruit because I think it feels like a different culture to them, possibly they are afraid of the unknown.'

79. Staff members with disabilities had varied experiences within the council, largely dependent on their relationship with their line manager. A number of staff observed that the council could do more to recruit and retain staff with physical disabilities, who could then act as internal and external role models.

'Our figures for how many disabled people we have on our staff may be good, but it depends what the disability is. I don't see a lot of staff in wheelchairs working here for example and I only know of one person who uses a hearing dog and one who uses a guide dog. In this case are our figures really that great?'

OUTWARD ORIENTATION

80. Much of the data gathered in the course of this project related to the internal workings of the organisation. Nonetheless, the objective of the inquiry was to facilitate on-going service improvement. The findings specifically related to external stakeholders – residents, the media and partners/ contractors in certain contexts – are summarised here.

The Public

81. There was some sense that front line staff felt undervalued:

'If the Council is perceived to be dodgy by residents, then unfortunately the staff are tarred with the same brush. We may not be seen as 'bloody council

workers' anymore but they don't see us for what we do either. Staff feel in the dark as well, front line staff are the last to be asked about anything, it's like a mushroom.'

82. There is a strong sense that the front line relationship with residents and service users was of fundamental importance but is often underplayed:

'The best form of communicating with residents is through our front line staff, they are all our ambassadors and they are what residents judge us on. We should take that into account when we are trying to improve performance.'

'Islington could be a better place for public and its employees if it did real consultation ...'

Partners

83. Partners see the relationship with them as largely dependent on how individuals act in particular on sharing information and their degree of comfort with risk and innovation. There is some concern about delayed communication and poor internal communication in the Council, leading to slowness or decisions being unravelled. Some partners felt that individual officers were not given enough authority to make decisions with partners. Some also felt excluded processes until too late - *'with Islington it is always the 11th hour'* - and the degree of control that LBI exerts limits their contribution. Greater openness was seen as necessary to secure further improvement.

84. Equally, some staff gave examples of inadequate service delivery by partners that should have been addressed. There were several calls for closer monitoring of contracts and service delivery, tougher responses to failure to meet agreements or standards and more flexible contracts both to manage risk and create opportunities for innovation.

Media

85. There is concern about the relationship between the Council and local print media. In the view of some staff, the Council is frequently portrayed unfavourably in some local newspapers - *'It can be de-motivating to do good work and have this overlooked by the newspapers.'*

ANNEX C: CORRELATION OF FINDINGS WITH STAFF SURVEY AND EXISTING POLICIES

The Assessment Team undertook this exercise to identify the main ways in which the findings reinforced or departed from other assessments and policies that have been adopted by the council.

Corporate Plan

Considerable similarities between the aims of the corporate plan and issues identified in the diagnostic:

- valuing a diverse workforce with skills, knowledge and behaviours to secure improvement
- recruiting and retaining talented people
- developing the skills and flexibility of the workforce
- improvement in internal communications
- enhancing appraisal systems
- strengthening corporate standards and procedures
- recognising the importance of partners
- addressing areas of poor performance
- the importance of standards of customer care.

There are also some points about the corporate plan that reinforce concerns expressed in the assessment:

- the vision of the A1 borough is not fully understood and owned in the council
- there is no clear identification of the extent of future change needed
- involvement in the process of developing the plan is very patchy
- follow through is patchy and not visible to most people
- there is little recognition of the need for creativity and innovation in moving forward
- there is relatively little on inter-departmental working.

E-Culture Best Value Review

There are strong correlations in the findings, in particular that:

- change is initiated but not always led from the top or by managers seeking to fix a problem

- more junior staff could be left feeling confused about the reasons for change
- corporate messages were inconsistently delivered
- the over-reliance on email significantly disadvantages those who do not have access to it
- the need to ensure that HR and other corporate policies are consistently interpreted and implemented
- IT systems are inadequate for some purposes and under-used by others due to lack of confidence or training

The main contrast was in the finding from this diagnostic that change management is improving (which is not borne out by the e-culture review).

HR Strategy

Looking at the emerging HR strategy the main relationships with assessment findings are:

- whilst the leadership “gap” in the organisation is recognised in the strategy, leadership is not well defined and there is an emphasis on management competencies rather than leadership qualities (even within the leadership development programme)
- the emphasis seems to be on achieving IIP accreditation rather than addressing actual management weaknesses within the organisation
- there is an implicit aim of achieving a diverse workforce but no targets or evaluation mechanisms. Actions appear to be driven by attaining ESLG-4 rather than more precise identification of the weaknesses in the context of this organisation
- there is recognition of up-skilling for smart working but less recognition of the need to change the approach to the management of staff to make smart working effective
- harmonisation of HR management practice across the council is not identified as a priority
- the focus of the strategy is on people directly employed by LBI not on contractors and partners
- in terms of temporary staff, the emphasis is on reducing reliance on them not on better management

- action to engage staff in creativity and innovation is Department focused not corporate.

Residents Survey

Main correlations:

- supports the view the LBI has improved but that performance is variable across the council
- communication is better but not good enough – and there is communication overload on some issues and not enough on others
- mixed feedback on diversity
- change is very fast in some areas and slow in others

Some contradictions

- “listening” is improving and our scores are above the inner London average
- Two thirds of residents think the council keeps them well informed
- More resident are satisfied than dissatisfied
- Spin – telling a good story – works with many residents.

Dignity For All

The assessment found positive views on the commitment of LBI to dignity for all. In addition:

- there is a perception that LBI is becoming better at encouraging people to speak out when things are not right
- leaders are seen by some as being more approachable
- One Islington as a statement is seen as a success – a common, inclusive vision
- There is recognition of progress on equality of treatment for LGBT, BME and disabled staff.

There are also findings in the assessment which challenge the success of the policy to date for everyone in the organisation:

- coasting is not seen as being sufficiently challenged
- favouritism is identified as an issue for some people and was linked to concern about cronyism on opportunities (particularly for promotion)
- there is a blame culture in some areas
- concerns about bullying and public admonition of staff
- the level of genuine commitment to diversity is still seen as patchy across Departments, the PASP is contentious with some, there is concern about the acceptability of speech which does not treat some groups with dignity
- resources are not seen as having been forthcoming to support the policy
- smart working creates tensions about unfairness (allowing some to evade their share of work)
- there is an increasing recognition that front line ambassadors for the council are often contractors or partners not LBI staff.

Staff Survey

Working for Islington

Strong correlations in terms of:

- need for better career paths (career development is the issue on which there is lowest satisfaction with significant differences of view between different groups of staff)
- stronger on rhetoric than practice on diversity (BME staff experience significantly less job satisfaction than white staff; permanent full time staff are significantly more motivated and satisfied than those with other employment status)
- there are differences of view between longer serving and newer staff; newer and younger staff are more satisfied

Equality and Diversity

Correlations:

- significant minority of people not satisfied with training and development
- satisfaction with working for the council varies between groups (on race and gender)

- only 45% of staff think appraisal has helped work performance and the majority of staff don't think it assists in developing new skills

Some contrasts:

- in the staff survey most staff are satisfied with equalities training
- satisfaction levels are consistent across Departments
- nearly three-quarters of staff see appraisal objectives linked to DPPs.

Communications

Some correlations:

- strong on communicating good news and success
- communicating urgent messages concisely
- good written communication (IC News and Members Bulletin)
- less good at communicating bad news and being proactive
- less good at face to face communication on a consistent basis
- problems with reaching staff who are not on-line
- less good at encouraging upward communication.